

From:

Angelillo, Janet. 2002. *A Fresh Approach to Teaching Punctuation*. New York, NY: Scholastic.

# Starting With What Students Know and Notice

## A First Unit of Study in Punctuation

“**K**id watching,” as suggested by educator Yetta Goodman (1978), is a way to gather the information we need in order to know what to teach. So, during the weeks when I was studying ways to teach punctuation, I spent much of my time watching children to see what they do as they read and write.

Being a teacher-researcher is fascinating and empowering because it requires us to use our creativity and professionalism simultaneously. It also shows that no teacher guidebook can tell us what we need to know about the individual learners, because students (and teachers) are, by definition, individuals. We must watch our students and do the exciting work of figuring out how to teach them what they need to know. In addition, the information we gather from watching children with a particular angle in mind—for example, how they use punctuation to make meaning when they read—can lead us to uncover important information about how they approach any learning task.

Janet conducts a mini-lesson on how authors use punctuation in their books.



During my initial time of watching how children learn to use punctuation, it became increasingly obvious to me that many were not writing with punctuation because they were not reading with punctuation. Time and again I observed children reading without noticing what the periods or commas were telling them.

## Whole-Class Work

### *Students Talk About What They Notice*

Most process-oriented classrooms have a meeting area, often with a rug and several nooks and crannies where students can go to read undisturbed. So Lisa Duffy and I started by asking her students to sit with a partner in a comfortable place. We gave each pair of students a big book and asked them to read it together, looking at the “little marks” on each page and talking with one another about what they noticed about them. We cautioned students not to focus on the story—odd for a reading lesson—but on the range of dots and dashes, and to think about why the authors might have used them.

## Guidelines for Listening In

- ❖ Give pairs of students big books to explore punctuation together.
- ❖ Ask students to talk about what they notice as they read.
- ❖ Listen carefully to what students say to each other, to gather information about what they know and what they are noticing.
- ❖ Use your notes to assess children's knowledge base.
- ❖ Begin to point children toward the writer's intentions by asking them to think about what the writer might have been asking them to do as readers.
- ❖ Chart their observations.
- ❖ Ask children to begin noticing punctuation in their independent books.

The ways students typically respond to this exercise are interesting. Some children appear to notice punctuation for the first time because it is so physically big in a big book. Others aren't quite sure what the punctuation is for—which is telling in itself—and merely count the number of periods. Some begin to look at the variety of marks, and, although they may have no names for them yet, remark that they see “a half circle with a period on its head” (i.e. a semicolon). Some notice marks that are familiar and are satisfied that they know what the marks mean: “The little open mouths before and after a sentence tell you that someone is talking” (i.e. quotation marks). With few exceptions, children are amazed and interested. For once, they are being asked to look at something besides the words to see how writers make the words work together to create meaning. We have opened their eyes to a new world, a world of nuance and shade. And, because we believe in inquiry, we are asking them to “figure it out,” rather than telling them the answers or giving them the rules.

Mini-  
Lesson

## NOTICING HOW AUTHORS USE PUNCTUATION

### 1. READ ALOUD A PASSAGE FROM A WELL-KNOWN BOOK

Lisa feels her students already have some knowledge of punctuation marks, so she begins her first punctuation mini-lesson by reading aloud the first page of a book the class already knows well, *Owl Moon* by Jane Yolen. Earlier, Lisa wrote the text on a chart:

It was late one winter night, long past my bedtime, when Pa  
and I went owling.

As she reads it aloud, she points out that the commas in the middle of the sentences make her voice do something. Most students notice the short pauses that the commas signal.

### 2. HAVE STUDENTS WORK IN PAIRS

Lisa asks her students to turn to their partners and talk about how the meaning might change or be confusing if the pauses weren't there. She and I then listen in on one or two groups. We hear students say things such as "The beat of the sentence would be different" and "You'd think her words were all jumbled up." One child says that he heard no difference, so his partner proceeds to read the sentence aloud to him one word at a time emphasizing the pauses.

Other children notice sophisticated things. For example, Jennifer says, "I think that if that first comma wasn't there, she'd have to use the word 'and.' But then the rhythm of the sentence would be changed. Like singing a song all wrong."

"Yeah," Jeremy says. "Or you'd think it was just a too long sentence and you could trip reading over the words."

"I don't think I would understand it if she didn't make me slow down with the commas," Eric says.

"I think you have to read that sentence in three parts," adds Kenesha. "And

without the commas, you wouldn't have three parts at all, just a mess."

Already students are beginning to turn up their thinking about what punctuation does to reading. Lisa's mini-lesson showed them what she wanted them to learn by revisiting the text of a book they knew well. Looking at this text allows the children to study punctuation in the context of writing by an experienced practitioner, Jane Yolen, rather than trying to apply a list of external and potentially confusing rules to their own writing.

### 3. ENCOURAGE SMALL-GROUP INQUIRY WITH BIG BOOKS

We give small groups of students big books and have them read through the books together. Again, we ask them not to focus on plot, but to look, instead, for interesting punctuation and how it helps them "get" the meaning of phrases or sentences. We hear groups talking about how the reader knows the way the author wants the sentences to sound.

#### TRANSCRIPT OF A TYPICAL GROUP'S CONVERSATION:

Michael: Look, on every page there are these three dots (i.e. ellipses).

John: Periods.

Michael: No, they don't work like periods, 'cause these aren't sentences.

John: Maybe they're cutting off.

Michael: What?

John: Like someone is talking and someone else cuts them off.

Michael: Oh yeah. But there's no talking. See? No quotation marks.

John: I don't know.

Michael: Maybe it's one sentence that goes to the next page.

John: Yeah, maybe.

Michael: Yeah, look. It is.

John: So why three periods when it's the middle of the same sentence?

Michael: I don't know. Let's ask.

John: Could it be like the author is saying, "Get ready for what's coming?"

Michael: You mean like coming attractions.

John: Yeah. Like that.

TRANSCRIPT OF A STRUGGLING GROUP'S CONVERSATION:

Susan: I don't get it.

Amy: We got to look at the dots.

Susan: What for?

Amy: I don't know.

Susan: (*shrugs*) I still don't get it.

Amy: Maybe we should ask.

Susan: (*shrugs*) What are they doing? (*points to next group*)

Amy: (*watches*) They got a different book.

Susan: All they're doing is talking about the wiggle marks.

Amy: So?

Susan: (*scoots closer to next group and watches them*) Look, Amy.

They're talking about how the dots are different. I mean that they mean something different.

Amy: So now what?

Susan: We look in our book here. For the dots. (*flips through pages*)

Like this one here. Weird. What is it?

Amy: That's two of them together. One's on top of the other (*i.e.* a colon). I wonder what that means.

Lisa and I rejoice! Despite the disparity in the sophistication of their talk, all students make headway into recognizing that punctuation aids in creating meaning. We conclude that students, for the most part, know what punctuation is, but don't understand its power. They have never been given the time to negotiate meaning using punctuation marks as clues, because they have never been taught to look at text this way.



#### 4. RETURN TO THE MEETING AREA FOR A CLASS SHARE

We call students together for a share and ask them to tell us what they discovered. Their findings are interesting, and some quite complex. A few children are still at the level of merely noticing that there were some dots on the page. That is okay; they are beginning to realize that there are different types of marks and that each one has some meaning, even if they haven't discovered it yet. Further, the class share opened a window for these students; they saw the value in noticing something and coming up with an idea about what the author was doing.

We gather students' findings on a chart listing the punctuation mark, the text in which it was found, and the reason the author may have used it. (See Appendix C, page 140.)

Punctuation		
What we noticed	What it meant	Examples of work
periods .	stop	A bird lived in an old tree.
comma ,	stop, pause, and take a breath	Once upon a time, in a house in the woods
exclamation mark !	To say something louder. It makes it more exciting	An apple a day!
quotation marks " "	Someone or something is saying something We use quotation marks with dialogue	"cluck, cluck, cluck," said the hen.
ellipses ...	stop and pause	He heard a voice say ...

**A** class charts an author's punctuation intentions.



---

### **APPLYING THE LESSON TO STUDENTS' OWN WORK**

In the writing workshop, Lisa continues the line of thinking by asking students to look in their notebooks for writing in which they used punctuation in interesting ways. Many students had never, or hardly ever, used punctuation before, which, of course, we know. This exercise provides them with an opportunity to take a good look at their own habits. Some children revise old entries by adding punctuation. As with anything new, they tend to "overuse" punctuation, especially the more exciting marks. But we all like to use new things a lot. (When I got a new bread machine, I used it every day until the newness wore off.) So Lisa and I are confident that, say, the children who were using twelve colons on each page will eventually settle back into an appropriate number as they gain facility and experience with using them.

### **EXTENDING THE LESSON TO INDEPENDENT READING**

The next day Lisa has students apply the thinking they had done with big books to their independent reading books. As they look back over parts they had read, she hears them reading sentences aloud, thinking about how the author wanted them to be read. The children conclude that the punctuation marks are the author's instructions on how to read his or her writing, "road signs" on the page. The idea of author's intent was born—and, as a result, students begin to think about how they want their own writing to be read.



## Mini-Lesson

# MODELING AN AUTHOR'S INTENTIONS

The next time we meet as a class, I do some writing on the overhead projector, and ask the students to help me “play” with the punctuation to shape the meaning. I show them how I draw on my experience of how punctuation works to help my readers. I decide how I want the piece to sound, and then I think aloud about how the punctuation will help my readers “hear” that sound. I think aloud about the rhythm I want to achieve. I let students see me choose the punctuation, because I want them to see how it will serve the meaning and tell my readers how I want the piece to be read. (See next page for a transcript.)

I also think aloud about some of the accepted conventions of comma usage that help me make decisions, because I want students to know that decisions like that are not arbitrary. Many children recognize quickly that commas separate items in a series, so I begin by modeling that rule. Because children often don't notice that commas separate two independent clauses joined by a conjunction, that is one rule I really want to demonstrate to them.

At one point, I say I'm not sure how to punctuate the sentence. I need to look it up in *The Elements of Style*. I want students to know that even adult writers must sometimes look for guidance in style books. I plant the idea that there is a way of using punctuation that makes sense, melody and phrasing that exist beyond aimless play, and that there are places where writers can look up this information.

## More Ways to Help Students “Discover” Punctuation

- ◆ Hold class discussions about what students discover about punctuation in their reading.
- ◆ Create a class chart of students' findings. Write entries in their own language.
- ◆ Include examples from books and add them to the chart.
- ◆ Use daily read aloud to build awareness of rhythms of words and shapes of sentences.

## 1. THINK ALOUD ABOUT PUNCTUATION

I put the following draft of a short-story beginning on the overhead.

*Mama picks up games at garage sales if there are pieces missing we use pieces from other games sort of mix and match we have no complete sets only bits and chunks you can think youre playing clue and find out we beat you with monopoly rules tonight were playing risk which in our house can be pretty risky*

*Now Papa is laughing his big laugh he spreads the pieces out and gives us all our armies pink yellow blue green purple armies such a silly game for a family that hates disagreements let alone war but Papa is serious about game playing he whistles and winks and shuffles card and says hes in a winning mood and taking bets we bet him two ice cream cones that we can beat him*

## 2. INTRODUCE THE PURPOSE OF THE LESSON

Teacher: "This is a draft of some writing I am working on. I'm going to work on the punctuation while you watch. I want you to know that in the real world, I would never have written this without punctuation. I did it just so I could show you what I'm thinking. Writers rarely write without punctuation and then go back to put it in. So let's just pretend I am trying to get my punctuation in this writing to help my reader read it."

## 3. USE A MARKER TO REVISE PUNCTUATION

Teacher: "Mama picks up games at garage sales" That sounds like the end of the sentence to me, so I'll put a period there. "if there are pieces missing we use pieces from other games sort of mix and match" I know I have to change the "I" to a capital in the word "if" because now it's the beginning of a sentence. And I want my reader to pause after "missing," so I'll put a comma there. I also want my reader to pause after "games," so I could put a comma

there. Is there any other punctuation mark I could use to make it sound like this? (*I read the sentence with "sort of mix and match" as an afterthought.*)

**Eddie:** How about a dash between "games" and "sort?" It would slow the readers down more than a comma, the way your voice slowed down more than a comma.

**Teacher:** Good idea. I like that. And I think it's an acceptable use of a dash, so let's do it. (*I change my comma to a dash.*) The next meaning chunk seems to be "we have no complete sets only bits and chunks," so I'll change that "w" to a capital and put a period at the end.

**Maritza:** Wait. Don't you need a comma after sets? We kind of slow down there when we read it.

**Teacher:** Hmmm, I agree. I'll put that in. Now the next chunk has some things in it that I don't even have to think about, because they are spelling rules that don't depend on how the writing sounds. The word "youre" is two words smashed together, so I have to put in an apostrophe and write it "you're." That's just the way it's done. And I see the same thing again in the word "were." It's a contraction of "we are," not the word "were," so I have to put in the apostrophe to show I left some letters out. And "Clue" and "Monopoly" are the names of games, so they must have capitals.

The next place where I see I have to do some hard thinking is "he spreads the pieces out and gives all of us our armies pink yellow blue green purple armies." The "h" in "he" needs a capital. That's a spelling rule for sentence beginnings. But this part at the end, where I say a list of colors, could be confusing for my readers. This is how I want it to sound: (*I read it slowly and deliberately*).

What do you think?

**Eddie:** That's easy. Just put commas in.

**Sam:** Commas won't slow us down enough. You should put semicolons.

**Teacher:** Sam, I think semicolons won't work there. Each part of the list isn't long enough.

Sam: So add in "and" between them. That will slow readers down.

Teacher: Like this? . . . "pink and yellow and blue and green and purple armies."?

Sam: Yeah.

Eddie: No, don't do that because you have a string of "ands" later on where it says "he whistles and winks and shuffles." I think you should use the commas.

Teacher: I think so, too. I often find that the conventional way is best, unless I'm trying for a special effect. I think the commas will slow readers down enough, but not grind their reading to a halt.

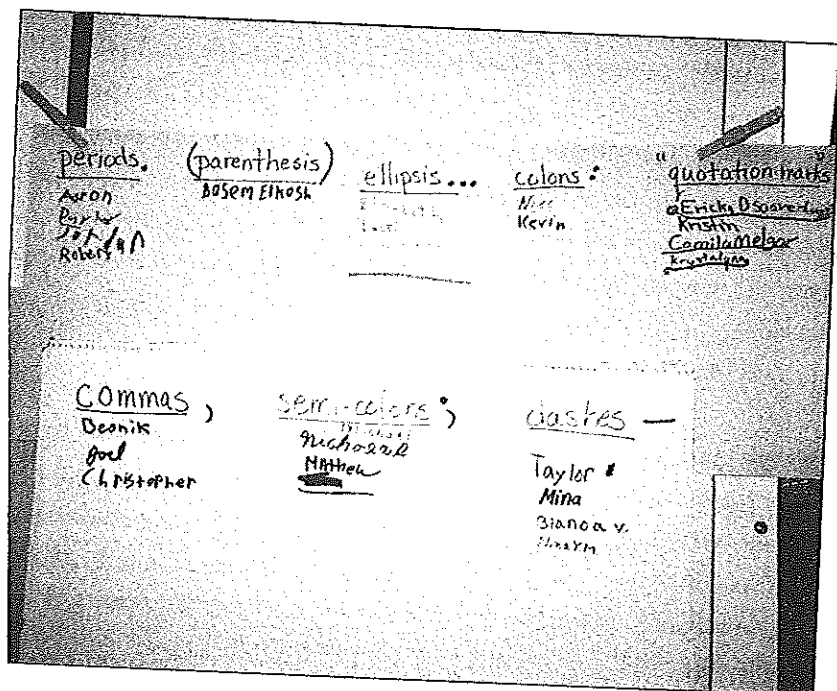
#### 4. ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO APPLY THE IDEAS IN THEIR OWN WRITING

Teacher: So, today when you are working on your writing, find a place where you can do this kind of careful thinking about punctuation. Mark it with a star or a highlighter, and we'll talk about it during our share time.

## Small-Group Work

### *Researching Specific Punctuation Marks*

Lisa feels her students need more information about punctuation before they can make informed decisions. So the next step is for them to meet in small study groups, with each group researching one punctuation mark of its choice. As a whole class, the children identify the punctuation marks that they want to study in depth. For the most part, these are marks that they feel are odd or unusual, such as the semicolon, the colon, the dash, and the question mark. Each child signs up for a group by signing his or her name below the mark on chart paper. (See photo next page.) The lowly period has no fans at all, so we tell students we expect them to use the period regularly and correctly, since nobody deems it worthy of study.



**S**tudents sign up for punctuation research.

The groups search through books in the classroom library to gather evidence on ways that authors used the mark they chose. Over the next two or three days, they propose definitions of the mark, with literature examples to support their theories and how writers use them to create meaning.

Students scatter around the room and spread books on the floor. We hear much negotiation and vigorous challenges among group members. We are excited that they do not just accept each other's descriptions passively. They construct their own understandings from authentic materials. Take this exchange, for example:

**Jules:** When you see three dots in a row it means, "Hold on.

Something big is coming next."

**Frances:** Yeah, but sometimes those three dots can mean that the author left something out, or that somebody cut the speaker off.

**Mary:** It could also mean to slow down your reading and make your voice go lower and get stretched out. Like this . . . Boo!

**Jules:** I still like it when you have to get ready for what's next. I think

I saw some authors use that at chapter endings to make you keep reading.

Mary: Yeah, what's that called?

Jules: Hangers?

Frances: Cliffhangers!

Jules: (laughs) That's it. I'm going to go look for some in a book.

Mary: Me, too.

Frances: Don't forget we have to make a chart.

The group work takes students to their notebooks, where they think about their intentions. They play with the meaning of the writing by playing with the punctuation. Of course, we see some pages that are sprinkled heavily with semicolons and dashes, but we are confident that they will soon learn to use them sparingly, like black pepper.

Eventually, students return to the "How Authors Use Punctuation" chart and add a column of examples from their own writing. After all, they have begun to use punctuation with the same kind of intent as the authors they quote.

**M**ary uses punctuation to build tension in her writing.

Published Work	Mary
	Last year my mother went to Flushing Hospital to have a baby. I thought it would just be a normal baby that could cry, drink a bottle and use baby and diapers. But she never came home. Something was wrong she had a hole in her heart. A nurse took my mom and baby sister to pediatric hospital in Manhattan. The doctor did surgery. I thought she would be better. But then she started to throw up. My mother took her back to the hospital. The doctor did a lot more surgery and put a 6" tube in her <sup>stomach</sup> but then my surgery. <del>three</del> <sup>three</sup> headed tubes for medicine and milk care but tipes. Phone calls in the night wake me up when the tubes don't work. My mother says that <del>that</del> <sup>that</sup> brings love to the house and family.

## **FINDING PUNCTUATION IN THE REAL WORLD**

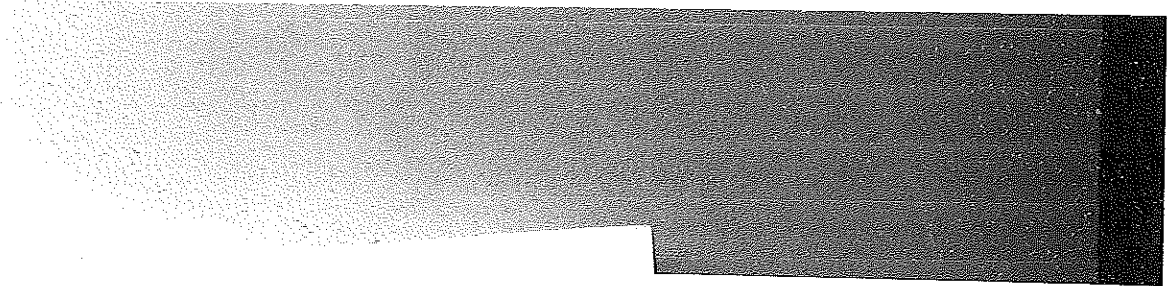
Students can hear all we have to say about punctuation (or anything else for that matter), but, if there are no real-life connections, little will stick. So we ask them to form groups and to “go out into the world” to study punctuation. We brainstorm a list of places where they might find interesting punctuation in the world besides in books, and then we make an appointment to meet together in three days to talk about what they find. (See box at right.) There is much buzzing and laughter as they search for unusual, insightful, or blatantly incorrect or odd uses of punctuation in the world.

When we meet next, students have books, clippings from newspapers, and copies of advertisements. In small groups, they share what they had found. Then each group decides on one sample to bring to the entire class. They also try to determine if the text shows a typographical error, a clear mistake, or an example of craft (Ray, 1999). The conversations are often deep, interesting, and even comical. One group displays a paper placemat from a local diner as evidence of punctuation gone amok. The students feel smart to see how much they already know about punctuation.

### **Places to Look for Punctuation**

- ◆ Newspapers
- ◆ Notes
- ◆ Magazine articles
- ◆ Letters
- ◆ Song lyrics
- ◆ Sports cards
- ◆ Billboard ads
- ◆ Event tickets
- ◆ Magazine ads
- ◆ Greeting cards
- ◆ Placemats
- ◆ Sale brochures
- ◆ Store posters
- ◆ E-mail
- ◆ Movie posters or ads
- ◆ Signs
- ◆ Direct-mail materials
- ◆ Yellow pages





---

The first unit of study convinced me that students need to know more about punctuation. They need the freedom of not being constrained by controlled texts or simplified versions of literature. They need teachers who are willing to reexamine their own ideas about punctuation, and possibly relinquish information they were taught in school that may not be accurate, but was school expedient. (For example, you may actually begin sentences with “and” or “but” as long as you avoid writing fragments.)

Students need to notice punctuation, talk about it, and play with it. Most of all, they need to discover it, not have it force-fed to them on worksheets or as rules to be memorized. They need to discover all the ways writers use the colon or semi-colon and the fun you can have with dashes. Suddenly, the comma is not a rule to recall; it's a way to shape your reader's understanding. This knowledge brings power to the little dots on the page, and power is, after all, what we want to teach children in their writing.